Mike Whitacre Intergen, 8 October 2024

An Odd Journey Made Easy

It was a sunny, powder blue sky day in downtown Boulder when I first met with my assigned student in the University of Colorado's Intergenerational Writing class. By his own account, "up to now, it has been an odd journey," said the twenty-two year old, Andrew. "Odd", maybe for Drew (as he is known to his friends), but he has seemingly made it look easy. Navigating life's challenges and travails have shaped the stand-up person Drew is to this day.

In the course of our conversation, I learned that Drew is the quintessential "all-American kid". Born and raised in the suburbs of Saint Louis, I could picture him as a youngster playing ball in the neighborhood streets and competitively scrapping it out with his older brother, Ryan. There, in Saint Louis (a historical hotbed of American soccer), he captained his soccer team at De Smet Jesuit, leading it as a talented center midfielder. That's the guy who is the playmaker that makes others around him look good. I imagined him as the kind of kid who, way back in youth soccer, had to be placed in a different position by the coach to keep from running up the score. He was always a natural athlete who competed with a sense of joy, simply because he liked playing. Speaking of looking good and "being a player", Drew was also the prom king and dated the prom queen from De Smet Jesuit's sister school. It was a typical "Leave it to Beaver" existence in America's Heartland. All was going well, with Drew having ambitions of playing NCAA soccer. He was being watched by colleges

who were interested in recruiting him. Then, he blew out his knee. It was his senior year. There were three games left in the regular season. Playing all out (as he always did), he went in for a fifty-fifty challenge of a loose ball and hit an opposing player. They clashed, knee-to-knee, leaving Drew unconscious, and the team stunned. The damage to the patella meant his season was over, and Drew knew right then that his dreams of playing at the next level were dashed. While the team went on to win the state championship, his offers to play college ball were pulled. It was a huge disappointment, but because of a more significant event in his life that took place only a year earlier, his attitude was accepting, and he remained positive. Last minute, he changed course to find himself, not staying close to home and going to Missou, like most of his suburban pals, but matriculating to CU-Boulder where he has spent his entire four years of university.

To find himself in Boulder may not have been anticipated, but Drew rolled with it as part of the plan. He could release the control of events because of his experience, first-hand, with the sinewy twists and turns in the road of life. He had learned the truth that so many of us struggle with: “things change.” He absorbed this lesson through seeing his own mother pass away after an eight-year battle with colon cancer. It didn’t make sense. As a seventeen year-old in his junior year of high school, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, his mother succumbed to the disease. When I inquired how he dealt with that, he said that people rarely asked him about death and dying, and that he has “a different view.” He looked up and told me how his mother’s last days were spent in hospice in his childhood home. With Ryan (who Drew still describes as a “good kid”) they sat by his mother’s bedside during her last weeks at home. That was difficult, and of course, there is anger to put aside

in figuring out “how to make it not suck because it just does.” He grew pensive and said, “death happens and it always does, but in an odd way, it was a blessing,” reflecting on how it brought the big extended “Italian family” of aunts and uncles together. Seeing his active, fit mother’s decline made him “live with more patience”, be mindful of “going with the flow”, realize “you don’t have to worry”, and that “It’s all about resiliency.” In speaking with him, it occurred to me that I, an elder, have things to learn from Drew. He knows that most travails in life are trivial. Deep down I guess we all do, but few of us have gotten to the point where we can view challenges as ephemeral and know that nothing matters, really. For a kid whose father instilled the maxim “be coachable”, it is he who can coach us because of his lens on life and living.

From that pivotal experience Drew’s family started a non-profit organization (the 3/17 Foundation) dedicated to promoting colon cancer research. He wears a clover shaped tattoo with the numbers 7, 7, 3, 3 on the outside corners and a 1 in the middle representing his mother’s birthdate of 3/17 and her passing on 7/13. As a woman whose professional career centered on philanthropy, she would be proud of her son, because it is through her that Drew learned the value of “giving back."

What is expressed in Drew’s daily life is a resiliency and somewhat “easy” outlook that he gained in his formative years and that few possess even later in life. He may not participate at the highest level of soccer anymore, but he still has fun playing intra-murals. He may not have received a bid to join his fraternity of choice in his freshman year, so he started a new one on the CU Hill. As its founding father, he has guided the successful Delta Tau Delta chapter where he is the Head of Standards,

serves on the board, and spins the table as the DJ extraordinaire, leaving behind all inhibitions as his house wins the school-wide Greek dance contests. He smiles when he talks about that success, and how it came from a rejection. In his personal life he left St. Louis for the mountains of Boulder, while his father moved to Southern California, and his brother moved south to coach baseball at a small university in Georgia. The immediate family, while spread out, is still close, and talks a couple of times a week because that is what matters. With the founding of Delta Tau Delta he created an even bigger extended family, and through his leadership it will have a ripple effect well beyond The Hill.

Drew, being the young man who said at the outset of our interview that it has been an odd journey, has turned what others may see as setbacks into positive outcomes. As he explores a future in the world of advertising, one in which his father still works, his passion is evident. We talked about how much the industry has changed since the days of “Mad Men” and how, in my youth, there were three television channels airing commercials for dishwashing soap, automobiles, and fast food restaurants. He smiled when he spoke of the advertisements that he remembered, especially the ones with “talking animals”. I reminisced about the impressionable jingles from my youth, and he proudly told me that his father composed one that would play on the radio while they were driving to school. That whole world of advertising is rapidly changing. Today, it is being driven by “influencers”, social media posts, and AI. No matter the era, Drew’s natural ability to communicate and listen will always be great assets. In spite of this data-driven world in which we live, he asserts that all the stats and AI do have a place in strategic planning, but they cannot replace “how we interact culturally.” “That is what interests me,” Drew said, adding, “I understand the

importance of analytics and the contextual things that are going on, but I'm still a firm believer in the heart." And, this coming from a guy who already knows a thing or two about heart.

Where There's a Will

There's alchemy in the mixing bowl. There's the slow rhythm of the spoon, the gentle folding of the contents that, just a moment ago, were *mise en place* on the counter, arrayed in a splendor of primary colors, chopped, diced, and minced in proportions that are just … *right* … though it's not always clear why. The little Will stands on a stool in the warmth of the kitchen and the radiating bodies of his extended family, engaged in an act of collective love and sustenance as the food is prepared.

He wanted to be a better cook. There was a stint at culinary school, cut short before the much-anticipated baking class began, interdicted by a worldwide pandemic. He already knew that cheffing was for others. There is conflict in turning the preparation of food – an act of love – into work, a job, a chore, something-one-has-to-do-or-one-is-homeless. Will feared that the love he feels when adding the ingredients to the wok, stirring them in, hearing the sizzle and smelling the browning and spices, and most of all, watching people *eat* his food and feel the warmth and delight as the nutrients course through their blood … would vanish in the pounding pressure of customer demand he felt at his restaurant job in Vail.

But there are other ways to give love.

You'll find him circulating in a room full of introverts, fighting his own introversion to pull the outliers – the ones on the fringes – into the group's cheer. You might see him deep in conversation with a bigoted roommate who, somehow, also happens to be a very decent human being, trying to find avenues to relieve the pain of the fear and anxiety that drive

rejection of those outside our in-groups. There is the fierce defense of his younger cousin, more like a sister, really, whose self-talk is all about her self-loathing, whose arms bear cruel-steel scars, and whose nose is perfectly lovely without any need of the plastic surgery she thinks will improve her. Ask his friends, and they might tell you that Will is a bulwark. A rock. A seawall to break the push and pull of a relentless sea of angst. The strong shoulder you need for your tears. The gentle touch you need for your wounds.

But who heals the healer?

William. It means "resolute protector." William the Conqueror. William Wallace. William Tell. Men in armor that hides and protects their fundamental vulnerability. Chafed and naked behind their exoskeletons, these Williams are poured into the obscurantist, two-dimensional molds of history that hide the simple reality that strength cannot be present in the absence of weakness, and courage cannot be in the absence of fear.

Directly ask him, and Will will tell you there has been little or no trauma in his life, but even the casual translator cannot miss the little paper cuts, or sometimes even deep sword cuts, of growing up … Will. The extended family in the home of his preteen and teen years – mother, grandmother, uncle, aunt, three cousins – was a necessity forced upon his mother by the savagery of the 2008 economic collapse and the specter of homelessness. Though his mother did her best to hide the family's precarious circumstances from him, his subconscious could hardly have missed the threat of looming poverty, a threat that forced his mother into stealing toilet paper, in the furtive glances and tense body language of his elders. Nor could he avoid inheriting

the epigenetic trauma of a Brazilian grandmother who scratched and screamed her way out of the clutches of human traffickers who would force her into sexual slavery in the promised land of the United States.

Sitting across a table of good food from Will, looking into his glistening, deeply compassionate eyes and seeing the way the north light loves his complexion, it can be hard to believe that he would ever lack the female attention sought by young, heterosexual males. There have been girlfriends, many of which induced a difficult emotional recovery after breakups. But there has also been much initial rejection, and for the (objectively) silliest of reasons: height. Will is not tall in a world in which dating apps report that 45% of women prefer men who are at least six feet tall (which is 14.5% of the American male population). His mother used to have to reassure him that he wasn't ugly. That he was worthy. That he was a "good person," something Will continues to doubt in the face of all the evidence that he is. Trauma from the little paper cuts is still trauma.

There was a move to Colorado Springs when he was a teenager, ripping him away from his friends. His family, supportive as ever, found a way for him to commute 56 miles to his old high school in Denver so he could retain his friends, but that didn't happen, really. Oh, there was still friendliness to be had, but the deepness of friendship that comes from hanging out after school and simple proximity was gone. Will decided to attend CU for college, in part, because of the requirement that all freshmen live together in dorms. He sought the closeness that comes with proximity, and he wasn't disappointed. As he says, "College is the first time I've had a best

friend since elementary school."

Physical closeness … proximity … defines Will's relationships. He has difficulty maintaining long-distance connections. If he goes home even for a weekend, he misses his friends. As a student of psychology and with a goal of becoming a psychiatrist, Will is painfully aware of his own motivations driven by his needs. He knows he struggles with loving himself, and believes deeply that he can't expect anyone to love him if he doesn't love himself. And he's not quite ready to say he loves himself. That feeling just isn't quite there, yet. He is much more comfortable giving than receiving, and much more comfortable with others if he feels he has given more than he has received. It is this core, and his desire to help those who struggle as he struggles, that drive his ambition to become a therapist. He lights up when talking about new drug therapies for rewiring the brain and curing the depression that made scar tracks on his cousin's arm. There is drive there. There is that goodness he is not sure he has, or is.

There is that age-old question Plato tells us Socrates claimed not to know: "What is the good?" The social scientists might tell us that it's social behavior as opposed to anti-social behavior. Many of the world's religions might tell us that it is the subordination of the selfish impulse in favor of serving others. If, in fact, that is goodness, then Will is about as good as it gets. Whether it is serving by lending a healing ear to others, or serving the warmth that suffuses the beloved Asian food he prepares for others, Will is … good. Worthy. Among the best of us.

Would there were more Wills.

Overcoming Immense Odds

Growing up in a house that bred hate and intolerance, S.O.'s childhood in a rural town in southern Virginia was a less-than-desirable beginning. As a kid, you are told to listen to your parents, to listen to adults, and to trust whatever they say as the truth, but when you are told to hate, to treat others who are different than you as if they are less of a person, how do you learn to stop listening? How does one break the cycle of hatred when it is woven into the fabric of their upbringing? S.O., despite the immense odds going against him, managed to find a way to open his heart and push back against the very values that were thrust upon him since he was a mere child.

"I was 6 years old when my father took me to my first KKK rally…and my last". No one should be forced to experience such intolerance and mistreatment of another human being, let alone at the tender age of 6; despite his young age, however, even that little kid who knew little more than the word of his parents, young S.O. still knew that something just was not right. Being just knee height to all the white hooded members, he distinctly remembers looking around, and despite not understanding what the shouting was about, he could tell that it was filled with anger. To S.O., thinking back it feels more like a fever dream than a real event. He would say how there was always a conflict in his mind, ever since he was a kid. He was told to refer to men as Sir, and women as Ma'am, but when it was a person of color, suddenly he was told to refer to them by their first name. The conflict in his mind, ever since he was a kid was one of not understanding why people were supposed to be treated differently, why one person was supposed to be respected and another wasn't. It wasn't for many years that he finally understood the nature of

this conflict in his mind, which was the racist nature of many people around him. Not just of the people in his town, or his family, but even what he was taught in Sunday School. The racism had been so deeply ingrained into this town; it would have been impossible to escape it. It wasn't until he started reading that he was truly able to understand the malicious nature of what he was forced to experience. And among the many significant stories of his childhood was the book "Stranger in a Strange Land", a book from the 1960s about a Martian coming to Earth, but to S.O., it became a lesson to always question everything.

Unfortunately, growing up in a town that believed in segregation, the same town that had a glorified confederate statue until recently, a town that enforced the belief that some people were worth less due to the color of their skin, meant that being the one person who tried to fight for equality, often led to being the outcast. No one should be punished for trying to do the right thing, but for S.O., this wasn't a rare occurrence. To his father, and many of the other people in this small town of 500 people, being a man meant you were good at sports, and you were bad at academics, and being more interested in academics than sports was often met with punishment rather than praise. The effects one feels from being chastised for trying to do one's best would surely be lasting and more importantly, traumatizing for anyone. But S.O.'s unwavering determination to rise above the prejudice and intolerance that he experienced throughout much of his youth pushed him to become the man he is today.

For S.O., being in theater means that for just a few minutes, you stop being yourself, and you learn to become someone new, a character that has had different experiences and values, which can be immensely powerful in understanding people. It wasn't playing the good guy, the protagonist, that truly helped him understand others, it was playing the villain, the antagonist.

When you play the villain, you aren't just playing the bad guy, but you are embodying them, and to do that, you must also understand them. An immensely important lesson he learned was that no one believes they are the bad guy. People get hurt, and sometimes they hurt others, but there is always a reason why, and this helped S.O. realize that no one is truly evil but only misguided. When a kid is raised being told that one person is worth less than another as a matter of fact, it isn't hard to believe they would accept that, and in a way, you can't even blame them, but you can teach them. The genuinely remarkable is when a kid is raised being told that same story, and right from the beginning they question everything and go against what they are told is true, to go out of their way to grow as a person. That person was S.O. He was told many things that just were not true, and since the very beginning, he has fought it and always tried to do what was right.

Being one of the only ones to get a college education out of a large family of over 20 cousins, he has always stood out. Driven and motivated, S.O. was determined to make a good life for himself despite where he started, and he did. He pushed himself hard, once working over 120 hours in a week, but it wasn't because he necessarily wanted to, but because it was the only way he felt safe. When you are taught as a kid that if you get grades that are too good, you'll be punished, or that if you don't get good enough grades you will be punished, you learn to walk a fragile line, one with harsh consequences if you step out of it. It took many years, some therapy, and even his now wife, Kathy, for him to finally push past this mentality, to realize that he does have intrinsic value and that he didn't have to be the hardest worker just to not risk feeling dispensable.

“I don’t believe that we are here for a reason, but if I was put here for a reason, it was to stop the cycle of abuse”. After everything that S.O. went through, he is still such a loving and kind person, with an extremely open mind. Now he is the father of 2 kids and an amazing wife, all of whom have helped him reach the place he has always wanted. Even after retirement he still goes out of his way to get involved with his community and enjoys playing many characters in theater. S.O. is the kind of person who has fought his whole life to make sure that no one would feel excluded, no matter what the reason is, and he has truly overcome some of the biggest obstacles. Most importantly, however, is that when you speak with S.O., he'll humbly insist that it was luck, the support of others, or even just genetics, that carried him through. In truth, S.O. is not just a survivor; he's a story of hope, reminding us all that with courage, empathy, and an unbelievably strong spirit, we too can rise above adversity and create a brighter, more inclusive world for everyone.

When to Let Go of the Reins

Riding a horse with the grace and elegance of an Olympic dressage rider is far from an easy task, and yet one Susan always strove for. The subtle shifts of weight and pressure in the saddle, the direction you look, and the deep bond you hold with the animal, all a metaphor for the things we can and can't control in our lives. The rocking up and down on the back of the horse symbolizing all the ups and downs of life that we choose to push through for what ultimately makes us happy.

Born 81 years ago in Boston, Susan's journey through life would take her to many different places before finally settling down in Boulder. A move to Cuba at the age of eighteen months saw her first interactions with an education system and laid the foundation for her lifelong relationship with learning and teaching. She learned to read, write, and to add and subtract, only to be uprooted to Barbados at the age of seven where she was expected to write in cursive, perform long division, and learn French—a tall order for such a young child who hadn't been expected to do such advanced things before. Not even her parents could help her with the difficult work she was assigned for school, "My sisters remember mommy in the living room with her glass of sherry and me upstairs shrieking. Oh god it was awful," Susan said about her mom having to recover after arithmetic help on Saturday mornings gone wrong. This grim time in Barbados, however, eventually gave way to a "magical" time in Germany where Susan moved at the age of eleven. While only there for two years, her time was marked by idyllic childhood experiences like ice skating on frozen lakes and messing around with kids in the village

which, while paired with a more tolerable school system, made up for the experiences she had in Barbados.

Moving out of Germany and out of her childhood brought some challenges of its own for Susan, though. After coming to Littleton at thirteen, she struggled to fit in with the other American girls who were putting on makeup, wearing fancy dresses, and having boyfriends—things she had never done before in her previous homes. Eventually the misery of feeling ill-suited to interact with the kids around her would end when her father was transferred to Durango for work, and she was finally able to find the people she belonged with, the people she could laugh and play with but also have important conversations with. Eventually, the time to apply for college came and as any child would, Susan rebelled against what college her mom wanted her to go to and instead applied to Radcliffe University but would end up going to Colorado College.

Colorado College also proved a rocky start and Susan struggled somewhat to get over the appearance of being shy from her childhood. She found love despite her struggles, though, and dropped out to get married at the end of her junior year. Her marriage brought her to New York where her husband attended Columbia as a graduate student and where she would face a major setback in the form of a severe car accident, breaking many parts of her body and testing her resilience. Recovering from this trauma and turning disaster into opportunity, Susan and her husband moved to Reno where she finally started to find herself and really began to evolve as a person.

In Reno, Susan's grandmother gifted her a membership to Common Cause where she first began to apply herself to causes to make life better for others. She was tasked with

running a campaign for the ratification of the 26th amendment to allow 18-year-olds to vote, an issue which she felt very passionate about. In her eyes, an 18-year-old sent off to fight and die in Vietnam should be able to have a say in his country, and she was going to do what she could to fix that. She used her passion to find a purpose—to give a voice to those who had none. But her efforts to help others didn't stop there. Along with a group of other women, Susan started the first branch of Planned Parenthood in Reno which was the first organization of its kind in the area and helped provide valuable education and resources for women on their bodies and lifestyles so they could make up their mind for themselves on what was right for them. As usual, though, the stay in Reno could only last so long and, having already had their two children, Susan and her husband would pack up to come to Boulder for the first time so he could postdoc at CU Boulder.

Moving to Boulder was "sort of like coming home" because of the college and high school friends that both Susan and her husband had there. Only there initially for a short while, life in Boulder was interrupted by a short move to California and then Texas, where she earned a degree in English writing, before coming back. The experiences her children had in school in California prompted Susan to move them both into alternative schools. The poorly tested computer programs for learning math and lack of people to aid her daughter resulted and panic attacks which specifically pushed Susan to move her daughter into an alternative school. When her kids had to be moved to Texas schools, they fared even worse than in California. "The Texas approach was you're automatically naughty and stupid and this is how we're going to fix you," Susan said. This change from focus on how to learn and figuring out your own methods in alternative school didn't follow over and "that

permission to think outside the box got them into serious trouble." Susan was deeply troubled by the inability to keep her kids in a system where they could learn without being punished for the things she was proud of.

After her children finished school, Susan would face one of her hardest challenges yet with her son's mental health. The trouble largely began when her son dropped out of high school and faced legal trouble. He got put in prison because of a bad public defender before being released for ineffective assistance of counsel. Susan said there was a period of three years where anytime the phone rang, she would pick it up and only think "oh god." Her son began to build a life for himself and was doing well until he got a concussion snowboarding and was misdiagnosed with bipolar disorder by a psychiatrist. Susan had to deal with knowing her son was receiving electroshock therapy would receive calls that no mother ever wants to hear: her own son claiming it was his last day on earth. After a suicide attempt, her son would finally receive care from a psychiatrist who acknowledged the concussion and took him off all the psychotropic drugs. "The kid never looked back."

During the extreme hardship her son faced, Susan went to see a psychologist who changed her views not only on how she dealt with her son, but on how she dealt with life in general. After going through a list of everything that she had done to try to help her son, the psychologist asked her "what else can you do?" Susan replied, "I think nothing…" to which she was told "see, you have no control." Realizing her son's life wasn't in her hands allowed Susan to let go and focus on what she could control. She learned this same lesson when her father was diagnosed with cancer, and she concluded that there wasn't anything she could do to make him or herself feel any better. "I was brought up to be a very good girl and I

knew I had control over everything and had to make people happy," Susan said. The challenges she's faced in life have taught her that she "can change things that I can change and feel good about them."

This lesson would come to use once more when Susan's husband was diagnosed with cancer. Like her son, her husband suffered from major depression that got worse with the onset of cancer. This disease that was eating away at him can only have so much done to treat it, and rather than try to do the impossible and control his cancer, Susan's husband developed running to cope. Susan attributes this running as the reason her husband lived 10 years longer than he was supposed to and why they were able to spend so much more time together, making each other happy. She was diagnosed with cancer herself during the last year of her husband's life which only provided an even starker reminder of how many things aren't up to us. "Imagine what it would be like when the person you loved was dying and you were in the middle of chemo… that chemo is like being hit by a freight train."

Throughout all of this, dressage remained an outlet for Susan to challenge herself and change what she could. Much like life, dressage involves delicate balances and deliberate focus on the things you can control. You're bound to fail if you put all your attention on the things you have no say in, and Susan took this fact to heart for most of her life. Campaigning for amendments, educating women on their bodies, working in legislature, and teaching writing classes are all things that she could directly change to make the world a better place for others. These contrast her ability to leave the things that can't be changed in tribulations like cancer and mental health and represent her

knowledge of when to pick up the reins and steer life towards greatness, and when to let them go.